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ABSTRACT

In order to document the effects of including secondary students with severe disabilities in rural content area classrooms, this study interviewed 20 teachers who included students with severe disabilities in secondary schools and content area classrooms. How instructional practices are impacted when students with severe disabilities are included, and what educators have learned about including students with severe disabilities. Twenty educators were interviewed at the beginning and end of the school year to determine attitudes about inclusion, impact on students, effects on teaching practice, and needed supports. The educators felt that inclusion was the right thing to do and was working; class size and group focus was a challenge; support was needed from special education staff; both disabled and nondisabled students benefited from inclusion; specific teaching strategies had been developed, but grading and individual educational programs were a concern; and training and technical assistance were needed. The findings suggest that rural secondary educators are willing to include students with severe disabilities in content area classrooms, but that more research is needed to identify appropriate learning strategies. Contains 18 references. (SAS)

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# INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES IN RURAL MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL: PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSROOM TEACHERS

## Introduction

The movement toward inclusive educational programs for students with severe disabilities has gained broad support in recent years (ARC, 1995; NASBE, 1992;). A significant number of research studies have suggested that these programs promote important educational and social outcomes for both students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities (Halvorsen & Sailor, 1990; Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Snell, 1991). Unfortunately, the preponderance of research in this area has focused on elementary age students and on the restructuring of elementary schools to accommodate the needs of diverse learners including those with disabilities (Stainback & Stainback, 1992). With a few exceptions (i.e., Falvey, 1996; Jorgensen, 1996; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Ferguson, 1996; Schnorr, 1997), little attention has been paid toward the inclusion of older students in their neighborhood schools and in general education classes.

Additionally, research that documents the effects of including secondary students with severe disabilities in rural middle and high schools is limited. Rural secondary educators struggle with unique issues, particularly in terms of resources and support for diverse students. This study will describe how rural educators perceive the inclusion of students with severe disabilities and what they have learned as they have attempted to include these students.

Washington School District, in the southern part of the state of Utah, has for several years served students with severe disabilities in inclusive elementary neighborhood schools. Recently, district administrators decided to begin including students with severe disabilities in the middle and high school programs. This district includes both suburban and rural schools. Data for this paper comes from the first year of implementing an inclusive program for students with severe disabilities in a rural middle school and high school. The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of this change in service delivery for students with severe disabilities. Specifically, researchers sought to answer the following questions: 1) What do secondary educators believe about including students with moderate or severe disabilities in secondary schools and content area classrooms? 2) How is instructional practice impacted when students with severe



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disabilities are included into secondary school programs? and 3) What can we learn from educators who are learning to include students with severe disabilities?

## Method

Study site description. The study was conducted in Washington School district located in a rural area of a Utah. The district had a total enrollment of 16,650 students. The school district served students who resided in several communities ranging in size from a very small town of 250 to a rapidly growing community of 42,000. Although located in a rural area, the school district has been experiencing significant growth in recent years due to individuals relocating from larger urban areas within and outside of the state.

Secondary students with severe disabilities in this school district were served in traditional self-contained special education programs with a community-based focus. In 1993, district administrators decided to begin including students with severe disabilities in secondary schools. These efforts were again supported in part by two federally funded projects designed to provide teachers and administrators in these schools with training and on-going technical assistance. A senior high school and a middle school participated in the study. These schools were selected because they were just beginning to include students with severe disabilities. 673 students are enrolled in the rural middle school, including 6 students with severe disabilities, while 629 students attend the rural high school with 2 students with severe disabilities enrolled at the school.

During the study period, eight students with severe disabilities included in these two rural schools. IQ scores for the students ranged from "untestable" to 53. Students varied in their ability to communicate, from one student who was non-verbal to another who used three and four word utterances. All of the students spent part of the school day in content area classes and the remainder of the time in self contained classrooms or in a community based setting. Students were included in the following content classrooms: art, PE, drama, health, choir, shop and home economics. The amount of time spent in general education classes ranged from 17% to 72%. Assignment to classes was based on student interest and need. Some of the students were also receiving vocational training as well as personal management and leisure training in the community.

Study participants. Selection of study participants followed what Goetz and LeCompte (1984) describe as criterion based selection procedures. Individuals were selected because of their involvement with students with severe disabilities either in the classroom or within the school program at large. A total of ten educators from each school were identified to participate in the study. Six content area teachers in each school were selected; three of the teachers had students with severe disabilities in their content classes and the other three teachers would be including students later in the school year. The building principal, a school counselor and two special education teachers were also identified from each school to participate in the interviews.

Study procedures. Structured interviews were conducted with study participants in the fall and spring of 1995/96. An interview protocol was developed using the research questions as a general outline. Within each of the four basic question areas (i.e., attitudes about inclusion, impact on students, effects on teaching practice, and needed supports), specific questions were created to elicit from participants their perceptions about and actual experiences with students with severe disabilities in the school and general education classes. Interviews took place by appointment and averaged 45 minutes for each participant. Interviews were tape recorded with the permission of each participant and transcribed later for analysis.

Data analysis. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the researchers met to identify initial analysis codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Analysis codes for discrete responses in each question area were defined. The research team worked together on one transcribed interview in order to clarify the analysis codes and insure that the definitions were clear.

Following the development of the analysis codes, the researchers identified relevant themes in the data. Each team member read all of the transcripts for each school and compared their coding of the participants responses, with those scored by the other team member, in order to ensure the consistency of code assignment. Periodically during the analysis phase of the study, the researchers met to clarify the analysis codes and discuss emergent themes. Each researcher developed a written theme analysis for both the fall and spring interviews for each of the participating schools. Examples of participants' responses were selected to illustrate themes and patterns in the data. Using cross case and within case comparison strategies, a thematic framework emerged that provided insight into how educators perceived and experienced the inclusion of students with severe disabilities.

## Findings

Within each of the four question areas several themes emerged. The following are highlights of themes illustrating educators' perceptions and experiences in each of the question areas for both the fall and spring interviews. Generally, participants' beliefs and attitudes about inclusion changed very little from the initial interviews conducted in the fall of the school year. Because participants had the opportunity to observe and work directly with students with severe disabilities, the spring interviews contained many stories about included students and examples of instructional strategies. Changes in perceptions and experiences from fall to spring are noted in each of the theme areas.

Perceptions about inclusion. Participants initial beliefs that including students with severe disabilities was the right thing to do, were validated by actual experiences with students during the first year of implementation. Class size and the tendency to focus on the group rather than individuals remained challenges for many teachers. Participants

also felt that they needed support from the special education staff to help with students in the classroom.

Benefits for students. In the fall interviews, content area teachers were able to speculate in general terms about the advantages of inclusion for students with and without disabilities, while the special educators were able to describe specific examples of benefits for students with severe disabilities. A few teachers identified concerns regarding the actual benefits to students with and without disabilities in content area classes. These initial concerns were less of an issue during the spring interviews. Participants shared multiple examples of students with disabilities achieving in their classrooms academically, socially and behaviorally. Participants reported that students without disabilities grew in their overall acceptance and tolerance of students with disabilities.

Effects of inclusion on teaching. During the fall interviews participants questioned how they would accommodate students with severe disabilities in their content area classrooms. Teachers were concerned about the numbers of students they already had to work with, how much time it might take to create lessons for these students, and how they would grade the students with more severe disabilities. The spring interviews included many examples of how teachers had successfully accommodated for the students. It seems that when actually confronted with the students in a classroom, teachers were able to utilize creative and resourceful strategies for reaching these new students. Co-teaching, effective use of peer tutors, and sensitivity to each student's unique growth were some of the successful strategies implemented by these teachers. Grading the students with severe disabilities and awarding credit for student performance on modified tasks continued to be a concern for the teachers. Even though each of the students with disabilities had a written Individual Educational Program (IEP) in place, content area teachers seemed unaware of the goals and objectives in those documents and how that might relate to what was happening in their classrooms.

Training and technical assistance. Participants identified both internal and external kinds of support needed for including students with severe disabilities in secondary school settings. Teacher preparation or inservice, technical assistance specific to each student's needs, and collaboration among educators were examples of how inclusion was supported internally within each school. Funding from the district to hire additional help and purchase needed equipment was seen as external support for inclusive education. This external support from the district office was viewed as critical to the overall success of inclusion in the district.

The kinds of support and training suggested by participants in the spring were more specific because teachers had actual experiences including students. Communication with special education personnel was viewed as important for the success of inclusion in the school. Not only did communication among educators occur more frequently, but it became more collaborative with the sharing of strategies among teachers. In the high school, co-teaching approaches were implemented in content area

classrooms. External resources particularly to support additional personnel, technology and materials were viewed as important, especially if inclusion was to continue in the school district.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to obtain information from rural secondary educators about their perceptions and experiences related to including students with severe disabilities in neighborhood schools and content area classes. The authors interviewed middle and high school teachers in the fall as they began including students with severe disabilities. Secondary educators were asked to discuss their beliefs about inclusion, the outcomes they anticipated for students, how they felt an inclusive program would impact their teaching practice, and what was needed in order to include students with severe disabilities successfully. In the spring, following the first year of including students with moderate and severe disabilities, the authors interviewed study participants again, this time focusing on their experiences.

Almost all of the educators in this study believed that students with moderate and severe disabilities should be included in their secondary neighborhood schools. General educators teaching in content areas were also willing to include students with severe disabilities in their classrooms, but most felt unprepared to work with these students. This finding is consistent with the findings of several other studies (Bradley & West, 1994; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) and also suggests that many secondary educators when provided adequate support and training are open to the idea of including students with more severe disabilities. The educators we talked with described how they included students and suggested several strategies that would help to create successful inclusive learning environments for all students.

Class size is frequently identified as a barrier to successful inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) Many teachers in this study worried that because of the large numbers of students in their classrooms, they would be unable to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. A few teachers felt that including students with severe disabilities in their already large classes would take time and attention away from the students without disabilities.

Teachers were also concerned about the amount of time it would take to plan for students with severe disabilities. It is evident that arranging the school schedule to allow time for educators to meet collaboratively to plan curricular adaptations for students with severe disabilities is critical for successful inclusion. As others have noted, structuring the school schedule to allow for planning time appears to be an important organizational strategy to support change of any kind (Fullan, 1993; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Study participants recognized several positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Teachers reported that students without disabilities grew in their understanding and tolerance of differences. Teachers also believed that the educational

program of students without disabilities had not been adversely affected by inclusion. Students with severe disabilities grew in social skills and specific knowledge according to content area teachers and special educators. But as noted by others, the assignment of grades and credit for their classroom performance continued as a dilemma for many general educators (Bradley & West, 1994; York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1992).

Study participants identified informational needs and instructional strategies they felt would help them be more successful with students with severe disabilities. Teachers wanted more specific information about individual students' needs and abilities. Teachers in this study, as in a recent study by Downing, Eichinger, and Williams (1997) also recognized the importance of the support they received from special educators, para-professionals and peer tutors. Collaborative efforts among educators in these schools were also seen as positive and critical to the success of inclusion. Additionally, these educators identified as important the need for training in specific curriculum adaptations and instructional strategies as well as appropriate ways to measure learning.

This study was limited in that it examined the reported perceptions and experiences of secondary educators who included students with moderate and severe disabilities in their classrooms. Classroom observations and specific student data were not collected as part of this research. Although, the results of this study compare positively to the research of others (Bradley & West, 1994; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; York, et al., 1992): readers are cautioned that the findings from this study are limited to one school district in a specific region of the country.

The findings from this study suggest that the rural secondary educators in these schools were willing to include students with severe disabilities in content area classrooms. Future research in secondary schools including students with severe disabilities, particularly those in rural communities, should identify the strategies implemented in content area classes that promote learning for all students. Careful documentation of successful instructional approaches would add to a growing body of research that provides educators with an array of strategies for teaching all students in the diverse classrooms of today schools.

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